

Bluffton Today

NEWS

Open Space Institute acquires 3,800 acres for conservation in Jasper County

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Published 7:00 a.m. ET Aug. 8, 2021



As development continues throughout the Lowcountry, an organization recently announced its \$16 million purchase of land in Jasper County to be protected for public use.

The Open Space Institute said it closed May 20 on the 3,800-acre Slater tract in northern Jasper County. The purchase makes it "one of the largest conservation investments in state history," according to the institute.



The Open Space Institute recently acquired 3,800 acres of forestland in Jasper County for \$16 million. *Photo Courtesy Of Dana Beach*

The institute said it plans to transfer the property to the South Carolina Department of Resources as funding becomes available.

"The purchase and use of the property as a wildlife management area accomplishes goals identified in the county's 2018 comprehensive plan as well as the county's Natural Resources Conservation Plan of 2007, which specifically recognized the Slater tract as a primary longleaf pine protection area," Jasper County administrator Andy Fulghum said.

Fulghum said the land will be protected and programmed for use by residents and visitors. It encompasses 3,800 acres of mature upland pinelands, bottomland forests and cypress/tupelo swamps, a news release said.

Eleven miles of the Coosawhatchie River and its tributaries are within the borders of the property, OSI said, and the swamp and upland forests "mitigate downstream flooding and to sustain water quality in Port Royal Sound."

"The Slater property fully incorporates every characteristic that justifies land protection in South Carolina," OSI senior vice president and Southeast Office director Nate Berry said in the release.

Berry said the tract "expands public access in an area where public lands are relatively scarce; it protects water quality and fisheries in the Port Royal Sound estuary and the Broad River; it secures habitat that is essential for hundreds of varieties of plants and animals, and it helps mitigate climate change by storing hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon."

The release said the closest public property is a 40-minute drive for most Jasper County residents. It said the Slater tract will provide opportunities for fishing, hunting and other recreation.



"The property will be quickly designated as a heritage preserve and wildlife management area by the state, making it perpetually available for public enjoyment for hunting, fishing, hiking, wildlife watching, and significant public educational opportunities to include academic research and local school outdoor lab opportunities," Fulghum said.

The tract "is the anchor property for a larger initiative in this region to permanently protect habitat for rare, threatened, and endangered species of plants and animals," the release said.

"Multiple aquatic systems and sensitive species along five miles of frontage on the Coosawhatchie and Tulifinny rivers will be protected while the diversity of wildland recreation opportunities in Jasper County will be expanded, increasing tourist attraction, stimulating the economy, and providing an opportunity to educate all on the wise use and management of

our natural resources," Fulghum said.

The property includes a sand ridge that hosts a growing population of 150 gopher tortoises. A federally designated "at risk" species, gopher tortoises excavate burrows that provide habitats for dozens of other animals, making it a "keystone" species, the release said.

"We are excited about the protection of the Slater tract and appreciate the partnership of OSI to ensure this tract remains a key piece for natural resources, such as the state endangered gopher tortoise," DNR director Robert Boyles said.

Other rare animals at the site include southern hognose snakes, federally protected Rafinesque's big-eared bats, bald eagles, Florida pine snakes and eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, OSI said.

The Slater tract links the ACE Basin National Wildlife Refuge with the Southern Lowcountry Focus Area, according to the release. Combined, they "cover more than a tenth of South Carolina's land area, and constitute one of the largest undeveloped, ecologically intact regions on the East Coast."

"The protection of Slater is not just a game changer for future ecosystem protection and land use in this region. It is the game changer," said Chris Marsh, director of the Spring Island Trust and the Lowcountry Institute said. "OSI's protection of the Slater Tract is a huge win for all those who love the outdoors in the region because it represents the first critical step in



protecting the headwaters of the Port Royal Sound."